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ABSTRACT

A survey of a random sample of Illinois elementary, junior, and senior high school second language teachers investigated three areas: (1) teacher preparation, training, and oral proficiency levels; (2) percent of the target language used by the teacher in the classroom within a specific time span; and (3) the teacher-perceived usefulness and frequency of use of specific techniques for developing oral proficiency. Results show: low level of teaching proficiency in the language taught; need for many teachers to upgrade teaching skills and techniques; low level of oral proficiency among teachers; relatively high amount of classroom target language use by elementary teachers; the greatest increase in classroom target language use occurred from second- to third-year classes at the senior high level; decrease of teacher target language use in multi-level classes; relatively low target language use in junior high and first- and second-year high school classes; most useful and frequently-used techniques varied considerably by instructional level; differences in technique used were more dependent on level than language taught; use of oral quizzes and tests was widespread at all levels; and newer communicative techniques were used widely. (MSE)

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# What Illinois Teachers Do in the Classroom: New Research

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# What Illinois Teachers Do in the Classroom: New Research

By LUCY B. CONNOR
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***EDITOR'S NOTE: One of Illinois' long-time dynamos in the foreign language teaching profession is Lucy Connor. Dr. Connor recently retired from teaching German at East Alton-Wood River High School. In 1994 she received her Doctorate of Education from Southern Illinois University-Edwardsville.***

***We present here a summary of Dr. Connor's research into the practices and techniques of the foreign language teachers in Illinois. This scientific investigation into the actual practices of our colleagues will help readers see how their own teaching styles and techniques compare to others around the state.***

**—Dennis Church, *Guest Editor***

As the foreign language teaching profession continues to address the issue of oral proficiency testing of both teachers and students, it is highly useful to examine certain teacher concerns regarding teaching for oral proficiency. Although the development of all four skills is important in learning a foreign language, the current focus on building oral skills in the classroom has been intensified by the *ACTFL Guidelines* and the oral interview assessment procedure. Moreover, students have indicated in survey after survey that learning to speak the language is their primary goal in modern language learning.

Although there has been much scholarly debate about oral proficiency in the literature, one finds little classroom-related research on the topic, particularly at the K-12 level. There is a dearth of data on the amount of teacher talk in the target language there is in the classroom. Little is also known about which techniques are most useful or most frequently used at the various levels of K-12 instruction to develop speaking ability. Moreover, the literature does not provide adequate information on the degree to which teachers are trained and informed about teaching for oral proficiency or the levels of oral proficiency modern language teachers in Illinois have attained. We therefore developed and administered a survey to explore these issues.

The instrument was developed over a two-year span with input from the research literature and from a panel of Illinois foreign language professionals. The research questions focused on three areas:

- teacher preparation, training, and oral proficiency levels
- the percent of target language used by the teacher in the classroom during a specific time span
- the teacher-perceived usefulness and frequency of use of specific techniques for developing oral proficiency in the classroom

A pilot study was conducted in 1992 to determine the item-reliability of the instrument that rated teaching techniques.

The final survey was mailed in late July 1993 to a random sample of 39% of the elementary and junior high modern foreign language teachers and 15% of the senior high modern foreign language teachers in Illinois. Four hundred five surveys were mailed; 68% were returned and analyzed.

## *Findings*

Spanish and French were the main languages taught at the elementary and junior high levels. German was taught mainly at the senior high level. Spanish dominated all levels of K-12 instruction except advanced classes at the senior high level. By fourth year, French was the main language reported.

Japanese was reported at the elementary level; Russian, Japanese, and Italian at the secondary level. There were no less-commonly-taught languages reported at the junior high level.

Fifty-one percent of the K-12 respondents rated their knowledge or information on teaching for oral proficiency as either good (34%) or very good (17%). Twenty-seven percent reported it as adequate; 15% as fair, and 7% as hazy.

The data collected on the respondents pointed to three areas of concern. Seventeen percent of the respondents had only a teaching minor in the primary language taught. Moreover, while 17% of the junior high respondents and 15% of the senior high respondents reported teaching more than one language, over half had only a minor in the secondary language. The concern here is low levels of teacher proficiency in the language taught.

Eleven percent of the respondents had taken no foreign language methods course, and 22% of the respondents rated their knowledge or information concerning teaching for oral proficiency as less than adequate. Just over one-third of the respondents (37%) had taken a proficiency-oriented methods class. The concern here is the need for many teachers to upgrade their teaching skills and techniques.

Only 27 respondents (10% of those sampled) reported an oral interview rating on the ACTFL scale. The average rating was 2/2+ for those respondents who learned the language primarily through formal education in the United States. That 89% of the

respondents had learned the language mainly through formal education in the U.S. should allow one to extrapolate that the majority of Illinois K-12 modern foreign language teachers, if given an oral interview, would cluster about the 2/2+ level. Yet research suggests the 3 level (Superior) should be the goal of teacher education programs if teachers are to model the type of language their students are to emulate.

### *Teacher Use of the Target Language*

Research into oral proficiency has put an emphasis on the need for copious amounts of comprehensible input in the target language if students' oral skills are to develop. Such research has focused attention on the need for teachers to use the target language as much as possible in the classroom.

Four findings on teacher use of the target language in the classroom were evident from the data collected. The first was the relatively high amount of language use reported by elementary teachers. The profession might benefit from more research into this area. The high percentage reported (70%) could possibly be attributed to the widespread use of Total Physical Response (TPR) at this level, a method in which the teacher speaks only the target language for extended periods of time.

**The amount of teacher talk in the target language in multi-level 3-4 classes was less than that reported for third-year classes**

The second finding was that the greatest increase in the teacher use of the target language in the classroom occurred from second- to third-year classes at the senior high level, increasing from an average of 50% to 75%. With two years of language learning, students are better equipped to understand more of the target language. It is at this point also that most students progress from the Novice to the Intermediate level of proficiency, the learner outcome usually recommended by colleges for high school foreign language students. Yet research conducted by the Illinois State Board of Education in 1984 found that only 12% of Illinois high school students enrolled in a foreign language continue foreign language study beyond the second year.

The third finding was the decrease in the teacher use of the target language in multi-level (combined) classes as compared to single level classes. For example, the amount of teacher talk in the target language used in multi-level 3-4 classes was less than that reported for third-year classes. Teachers reported administrative problems in teaching two classes in the same hour as the major stumbling block to the use of the target language.

The fourth finding was the relatively low amount of teacher use of the target language in junior high and first- and second-year high school classes. That was only about 50% at these levels, with many citing as the reason a focus on grammar and the need to cover the material in the textbook. This should also be a reason for concern of the teaching profession.

### *Usefulness and Frequency of Teaching Techniques*

There exists a dearth of research on what techniques are most useful or most frequently used by K-12 teachers in developing students' oral proficiency. Are some techniques useful to all K-12 teachers, regardless of the level or language taught? Are some techniques level-specific—i.e., elementary teachers find them useful, but secondary teachers do not? Are some techniques not useful at all?

Fifteen teaching techniques were rated on a Likert scale by respondents as to their usefulness and frequency of use in developing student's oral skills in the classroom. The five-point Likert scale for usefulness ranged from "don't know" to "very useful." The six-point frequency scale ranged from "never" to "daily." The fifteen techniques, which were gleaned from the research literature and validated by the expert panel, were:

- Audiolingual Methodology (ALM)
- Memorization
- Personalized Oral Activities
- Skits/Plays
- Conversations/Interviews
- Total Physical Response (TPR)
- Situational Role Plays
- Quizzes/Tests
- Small Group/Pair Work
- Spontaneous/Free Conversation
- Video Cassettes
- Audio Cassettes/Tapes
- Proficiency-Oriented Materials
- Listening Exercises
- Students Requested To Use the Target Language in Class

At all four levels of K-12 modern foreign language instruction, four techniques were consistently rated most useful and most frequently used—with few exceptions—in developing students' speaking ability:

- Personalized Oral Activities
- Students Requested To Use the Target Language in Class
- Conversations/Interviews
- Small Group/Pair Work

The most useful and frequently used technique in developing speaking skills at the elementary level was Total Physical Response. Personalized oral activities, conversations and interviews, student use of the target language in class, small group and pair work, and listening exercises rounded out the top six most useful techniques at this level. Memorization replaced small group and pair work in the six most frequently used techniques.

Junior high teachers ranked personalized oral activities, student use of the language in class, small group and pair work, conversations and interviews, memorization, and listening exercises

as their six most useful techniques. The same techniques were also most frequently used, with student use of the language topping the list. This was the only level that ranked memorization among the top five most useful techniques in developing students' speaking ability, although all four levels of K-12 instruction ranked it among the top five most frequently used techniques. Memorization was used more frequently by Spanish teachers at this level than by French teachers. Proficiency-oriented materials, video cassettes, and audiolingual methodology were the least useful techniques at both the elementary and junior high levels.

Teachers of first- and second-year classes at the senior high level ranked student use of the language in class, personalized oral activities, conversations and interviews, small group and pair work, spontaneous conversation, and listening exercises as the most useful and frequently used techniques in developing speaking skill. Memorization outranked conversations and interviews in frequency. Total Physical Response was rated by Spanish and German teachers—but not by French—as one of the least three useful techniques at this level.

**Audiolingual methodology was ranked least useful and least used at all K-12 levels**

Teachers of third-year and more advanced classes ranked student use of the language in class, spontaneous conversation, personalized oral activities, small group and pair work, conversations and interviews, and situational role-plays as their most useful techniques in developing oral proficiency. The rank order was exactly the same for frequency, except memorization outranked situational role-plays. Total Physical Response, video cassettes, and audiolingual methodology were the three techniques least useful in developing students' oral skills at the senior high level.

Audiolingual methodology was ranked least useful and least used at all K-12 levels. Scheffe's multiple comparisons of treatment means found *all* techniques significantly higher in usefulness than ALM in developing oral proficiency at the junior and senior high levels. Five techniques were significantly higher than ALM at the elementary level. Such findings lend support to the effectiveness of communicative teaching approaches in helping students develop oral proficiency as compared to ALM methods.

Video cassettes were also not useful or frequently used at the K-12 level. As one respondent wrote, "there are few good ones of interest to the students that they can understand."

Four techniques were level specific. Total Physical Response was used mainly at the K-6 level. Spontaneous conversation, on the other hand, was an important technique at the secondary level, ranking in the top three most useful and frequently used techniques for teachers of third-year or more advanced classes. There was a marked decrease in the usefulness and frequency of TPR from the elementary to the secondary level and a marked increase in the usefulness and frequency of spontaneous conversation. While TPR requires students to respond with body movements to often zany commands and is therefore appropriate for younger students, spontaneous conversation requires an active speaking vocabulary characteristic of advanced language learners.

Another level difference was the low usefulness rating given by elementary and junior high teachers to proficiency-oriented materials (13/15). Comments from respondents at these two levels seemed to indicate few, if any, exist for the developmental stage of their students. In contrast, proficiency-oriented materials were rated useful by senior high teachers, with Spanish and French teachers reporting them more useful and more frequently used than German teachers.

The last difference based on levels was the importance placed on memorization in developing oral skills at the junior high level. Junior high Spanish teachers rated memorization higher in frequency of use (2/15) than all other 12 groups. On the other hand, French and Spanish teachers of advanced high school classes were the only groups not to rank memorization among their top six most frequently used techniques, with French teachers at this level the only group to rank memorization as one of their least useful techniques in developing students' speaking skills.

The data supported three major findings. First, differences in techniques used were dependent on the level of instruction rather than the language taught. Differences in techniques used among languages were only subtle and usually occurred midway in the rankings, thus making them problematic to interpret.

The second finding was the widespread use of oral tests and quizzes at all levels of K-12 instruction. In general, the perceived usefulness of oral tests increased from elementary to secondary level, with the frequency increasing from once or twice a quarter to once or twice a month.

The third finding supported a rather high degree of usage of newer communicative techniques at all K-12 levels of modern foreign language teaching in Illinois. Audiolingual methodology was given little attention.

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